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Implementing College- and Career-Readiness Standards for English Learners (ELs): Challenges, Insights, and Innovations

C-SAIL C-SAIL
gse-csail@gse.upenn.edu

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Implementing College- and Career-Readiness Standards for English Learners (ELs): Challenges, Insights, and Innovations

Abstract

This brief presents findings from C-SAIL's Implementation Study, which uses interview and survey data to explore how district administrators, principals, and teachers are understanding, experiencing, and implementing learning standards in English language arts (ELA) and math with English learners (ELs). Drawing on data from five states—California, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Texas—we explore the insights, challenges and innovations shared by leaders and teachers working with ELs.

Keywords

college and career-ready standards, english learners, bilingual education, differentiated instruction

Disciplines

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research

Comments

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Implementing College- and Career-Readiness Standards for English Learners (ELs): Challenges, Insights, and Innovations

To date, standards-based reform has not typically focused much on the needs of students classified as English learners (ELs). While all states have their own definitions, English learners (ELs) are defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as “individuals who have sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language to be unable to learn successfully in classrooms or to participate fully in the larger U.S. society.” Given their unique experience in U.S. classrooms, how might ELs be better represented in the design of college- and career-readiness standards?

This brief presents findings from C-SAIL’s [Implementation Study](#), which uses interview and survey data to explore how district administrators, principals, and teachers are understanding, experiencing, and implementing learning standards in English language arts (ELA) and math with English learners (ELs). Drawing on data from five states—[California](#), [Kentucky](#), [Massachusetts](#), [Ohio](#), and [Texas](#)—we explore the insights, challenges and innovations shared by leaders and teachers working with ELs.

INSIGHTS

#1: Teachers in states with a longer history of supporting ELs receive more professional development in meeting those students’ needs and feel better prepared to teach them.

Teachers in California and Texas, two states with long histories of supporting ELs reported receiving more professional development and feeling better prepared to teach ELs than teachers in Kentucky and Ohio. While California and Texas rely on their own systems to develop this infrastructure of support, Kentucky, Massachusetts and Ohio have become increasingly reliant on the support of two national consortia—ELPA21 in Ohio and WIDA in Kentucky and Massachusetts—for support in developing more robust infrastructures to ensure teachers feel better prepared to support ELs. More research can help determine if these partnerships are able to further develop the professional development infrastructures of these states and help their teachers feel better prepared to teach ELs.

#2: Standards are largely viewed as appropriate for ELs and necessary in ensuring high expectations, with some exceptions.

According to survey data, district leaders and teachers generally agreed that their state standards were appropriate for ELs. In interviews, district leaders and teachers often discussed this in terms of the importance of having high expectations for ELs and the desire to maintain a high level of rigor in the classroom for these students. Texas state leaders have institutionalized these high expectations by integrating the needs of EL students into their thinking around standards-based instruction. As a result, Texas teachers reported similar time spent on standards-emphasized instruction across grades and subjects for ELs compared to native English speakers. In a similar vein, California has combined the ELA and ELD standards designed for ELs into one set of standards, which district leaders reported pushes teachers to take on shared responsibility for these students.

One area of concern was the cultural relevance of the standards, as some educators in California suggested that the content was far removed from the lived experience of their ELs. Another concern was that newcomers are often expected to meet the same standards as their native English-speaking counterparts with little guidance on how to make this a reality. District leaders and teachers in all states expressed a desire for more specific guidance from the state in this regard.

#3: ELA teachers reported differentiating their instruction for ELs at higher rates than math teachers.

ELA teachers reported differentiating their instruction for ELs at higher rates than math teachers. In Kentucky for example, 67% of ELA teachers reported providing somewhat different instruction to ELs than to other students, but only 49% of math teachers did. Districts in this state emphasized providing Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) training to assist teachers in serving their EL student populations. One district even created Newcomer Academies to serve the needs of the EL student population that represents speakers of 136 languages. The question remains why such initiatives seem to be more effective at changing the instructional practices of ELA teachers than math teachers.

CHALLENGES

#1: Lack of resources for differentiating instruction for ELs

While respondents reported a generally positive attitude toward the appropriateness of the standards for ELs, and ELA teachers reported differentiating instruction at fairly high rates, **district leaders and teachers still desired more resources in supporting ELs in meeting the demands of the state standards**. For example, California district leaders noted that while integrating ELA and ELD standards has been helpful, training teachers to teach in this way has been challenging, particularly because general-ed and EL teachers lack collaboration time and curricular materials have not yet caught up with this change. Limited resources have also created challenges for districts in Kentucky as districts experience large influxes of refugees.

Districts struggle to find bilingual teachers to support the many linguistics communities they serve. One district has an EL-to-EL-teacher ratio of 1-to-90 and relies heavily on part-time EL teachers, when available. Meanwhile, districts in Ohio were appreciative of the flexibility and ease with which they can implement programs for ELs in their district, but they struggled with this flexibility—often citing their desire for tangible resources to assist the process of differentiating instruction of ELs.

Although district officials in Ohio believe that they are following existing state policies for ELs, they **do not have a way of knowing to what extent high-quality programming for ELs is being consistently offered**. Officials in one rural district speculate that because of the limited state guidelines around EL supports, students receive varying qualities of supports—especially once those score sufficiently high on the Ohio English Language Proficiency Assessment (OELPA), triggering little follow up with those students. Additionally, districts in Kentucky expressed concern over new ESSA accountability measures focusing on ELs as their limited resources make it difficult to meet certain requirements.

#2: Validity and frequency of assessments

While district leaders and teachers had relatively positive attitudes toward the standards, **they had many concerns about the assessments that were associated with these standards**. A major concern of district leaders was the validity of some of these assessments in evaluating the academic progress of ELs. After one year in a district in Massachusetts, for example, ELs have to take the state Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment (MCAS). The resulting data of this first-year assessment is often not informative, as many of the students taking it still struggle to read English. One district leader said a “beginner version of the MCAS would be more appropriate” for EL students after a first-year exemption to give educators a better understanding of their growth. California respondents agreed. One district in this state wished ELs had a two-year grace period from the state assessment instead of the current one-year period.

District leaders also agreed that **ELs are tested far too often**. All ELs are required to take annual assessments of their English language proficiency. In addition, ELs who are beyond the exempted grace period, are also required to take the annual state content assessments. This state-level assessment system maps onto any district level assessment programs that monitor students’ progress throughout the year. In states like Texas, with high numbers of bilingual education programs, many of these assessments are administered in both English and the partner language.

Assessment has since changed with ESSA. States now have the option of a one-year grace period or a gradual three-year incorporation of ELs into the general accountability system. Further research is needed to determine the impact of this new flexibility on addressing some of the concerns raised by the district leaders in this study.

#3: Challenges to Bilingual Education

Most states offered few guidelines to support districts in creating bilingual education programs. One exception was Texas that provides Spanish Language Arts standards and specific guidelines on the role of these standards in different bilingual education program models. Yet, Texas district leaders reported concerns about these standards at the foundational level as well as the rigor of Spanish instruction and buy-in from general educators around bilingual education. Educators perceived the SLA standards as essentially a direct translation of the ELA standards, which educators believed was inappropriate considering the differences between the two languages. The state does not differentiate accountability goals for schools whose students are almost 100% ELs, leading to a lack of alignment between dual language curricula and assessment. Additionally, some district officials pointed to a political rhetoric challenging the legitimacy of bilingual ed programs, as well as resistance from general educators.

INNOVATIONS

#1: Moving toward dual language instruction

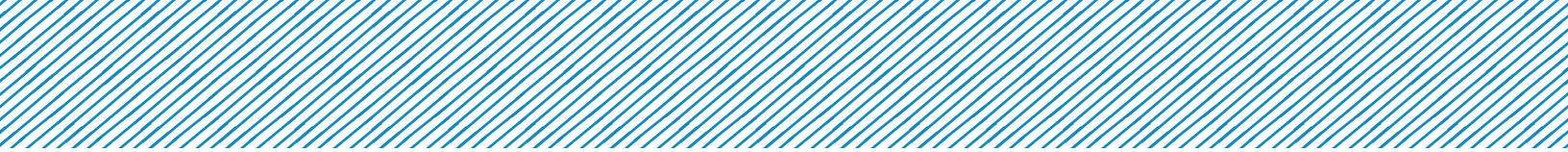
Despite the lack of a strong infrastructure for bilingual education within the context of CCR standards, **some districts found value in offering instruction to EL students in multiple languages.** One district in California offers a K-12 bilingual immersion program in which ELs initially take all of their classes in Spanish and continue to take two classes in Spanish—generally a language arts class and social studies class—from grade 6 through their senior year. Similarly, all six districts interviewed in Texas moved toward dual language instruction. Texas is the only state in the sample with mandated bilingual education when there is a student subgroup of 20 in a grade who speak the same home language.

#2: Building bilingual capabilities of school staff

Bilingual staff members were often hired to support schools and teachers. To build bilingual capabilities for teachers, one district in Massachusetts created a unique program where high school students host Spanish-language classes for teachers after school, which has been both valuable for teachers and empowering for students. Districts in Kentucky have hired bilingual staff to support schools and teachers, one district of which houses a language services department that provides translation services across schools. Bilingual associate instructors in this district provide language supports directly to students.

#3: Building capacity for supporting ELs

Many districts are creating networking opportunities and PD for teachers and principals to discuss the needs of ELs. One district in Kentucky used their principal learning network to encourage school leaders to discuss their EL needs and provide strategies that support standards-based instruction. Another Kentucky district led an academy for EL teachers that provided PD emphasizing the language dimensions to the KAS and project-based instruction that supports both language and content. Some districts in Texas also gave tuition reimbursement to general education teachers who obtained EL certification.



In Massachusetts, leaders realized that the importance of parental involvement in further developing their capacity to support ELs. To address this particular need, one district in Massachusetts developed an intergenerational language program in which parents can attend English classes along with their children in school.

#4: Increasing resources for EL teachers

Leaders in many states leaned on a number of resources to improve standards-based, grade-level instruction for ELs. In Texas, Language Acquisition Specialists, Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) training, and iStation software bolstered the practices of teachers in virtually all schools. Districts in Ohio partnered with ELPA21 to improve their professional development capacity. And after realizing that many ELs were failing classes solely based on their writing ability, one district in California hired a full-time teacher dedicated to providing one-on-one writing tutoring to ELs on a drop-in basis.